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ABSTRACT

When children watch television, they can assess the reality of what they are seeing. Content judged unreal may have less influence on viewers than does content judged real. This study examines children's reality judgments about television series featuring families with children. Participants included twenty-seven 7-year-olds, nineteen 11-year-olds, and nineteen 15-year-olds, with somewhat more girls than boys at each age. Measurement instruments included the Realism, Uses and Gratifications, Match Actual, Match Aspired, Television Literacy, and Viewing Frequency instruments. The children defined reality in reference to frequency among real-life American families so that characteristics of television families were judged more realistic when they were believed to be more common among real-life families. Children correctly recognized demographic differences among families and the lack of differences in portrayed feelings, actions, and general realism. Age of the child alone was never a determinant of adjudged reality. The lack of consistent, strong age effects may be due to the measures and methods employed. Further research should examine the mediating function of perceived realism in the television effects process. Four pages of references, five tables, and two figures are included. (ABL)

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BELIEFS ABOUT THE REALISM OF TELEVISION PROGRAMS FEATURING FAMILIES[1]

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INTRODUCTION

When children watch television or think about it later, they can assess the reality or realism of what they are seeing or have seen. Those who assign a significant role to cognitions intervening between exposure to television content and its social effects usually assume that the adjudged reality of television content is important. According to this view, content judged unreal or unrealistic should have less influence on viewers' information, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors than content judged real or realistic. The few extant direct and indirect studies of this assumption generally support it (Feshbach, 1972; Greenberg, 1972; Noble, 1975), although some suggest adjudged reality is a weak mediator of social effects (Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, & Fischer, 1983; Pingree, 1978; Reeves, 1977), and a few have found no evidence that adjudged or labeled reality mediated television effects at all (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963; Dorr, Graves, & Phelps, 1980; Klapper, 1981).

The present study assessed children's reality judgments about television series featuring families with children and/or teenagers. Because such series are popular with children, adolescents, and adults, fairly realistic, and often concerned with issues relevant to family life, their content is potentially influential for those who view them. As part of a long range plan to assess the influence of this content and the factors mediating its influence, the adjudged reality of the content and the correlates of the reality judgments were examined with children between the ages of 7 and 15. The present study, then, contributes to our understanding of television reality judgments in childhood and adolescence and of the factors influencing these judgments, while it also informs a long term project with a broader focus.

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Children's Reality Judgments

Over the years it has been demonstrated that even very young children will make reality judgments about television content, but there is distinct disagreement in the literature about developmental changes in adjudged reality, the accuracy of judgments, the content ordinarily judged, and the criteria by which judgments are made. The disagreements are such that only a few conclusive statements can be made about children's beliefs about the reality of television content.

Several studies, using different methods and measures, have provided evidence that up until the age of about 8 children are sorting out which television content is fabricated and which is not (Dorr, 1983; Fernie, 1981; Hawkins, 1977; Kelly, 1981; Klapper, 1981). Children learn this earliest for visually unrealistic content, animation and puppetry, and latest for visually realistic content. While this learning is going on, children's reality judgments will often focus on the nuts and bolts of how content was created if the methods of testing permit them to do so. The developmental course of reality judgments at this level is quite clear: Somewhere between 5 and 8 years, children learn that television programs are not "magic windows" on reality, glimpses of events as they are occurring or records of events that have actually occurred.

The developmental course of reality judgments at any other level is not so clear. Several studies, using children ranging in age from about 5 to 14, report weak age-related decreases in the extent to which television content was judged real, where real means something on the order of "like real life." These include studies asking children to judge realism at fairly high levels of generality, e.g., "people on TV," "what happens on TV," and "shows on TV" (Dominick & Greenberg, 1970; Greenberg & Dominick, 1970; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a, b; McLeod, Atkin, & Chaffee, 1972; Ward, 1972) and at somewhat more specific levels, e.g., "blacks," "families," "superheroes," and "The Fonz" (Fernie, 1981; Greenberg & Reeves, 1976). In contrast, Dorr and her colleagues (Dorr, 1983; Dorr, Graves, & Phelps, 1980) found no age-related changes in children's judgments that general or specific television content was completely real or completely pretend and age-related increases in judgments of <u>both</u> real and pretend. More conflicting results are provided by Greenberg and Reeves (1976), Hawkins (1977), and Klapper (1981) who found no developmental changes in judgments at the general level and by Klapper (1981) who actually found an increase with age in adjudged reality at the more specific level.

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Most studies implicitly, if not explicitly, assume that some reality judgments are more accurate than others and that, for the content being studied, less real judgments are more accurate. Where the reality being discussed is of the "magic window" variety, the assumption is unassailable, and the data clearly show increases in accuracy up until the age of about 8 (Dorr, 1983; Fernie, 1981; Kelly, 1981; Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a,b; Morison & Gardner, 1978). The assumption is more problematic and the data are less clear for other types of reality. Klapper (1981), for example, asserted that even second graders were quite accurate in their reality judgments when they were free to choose the content (often limited, concrete, or trivial) they judged. And Dorr et al. (1980) found that the majority of young children's reality judgments were accurate, again when children mostly chose the content to judge and then explained their reasoning. There was a significant improvement from kindergarten (55% of all real, mostly real, real and pretend, mostly pretend, pretend, and don't know judgments were accurate) to second/third grade (70%), but the generally good performance of both ages should not be overlooked.

The variety of contradictory findings for children's reality judgments and the evidence that under certain circumstances children's judgments can be fairly accurate (even if trivial) suggest the need for further analysis of the possibilities that television offers for making reality judgments. Television programming varies enormously in the extent to which its content is visually realistic and the extent to which it is based in or represents reality. The kinds of reality judgments that a viewer can make range from a few "magic window" judgments to many more complicated and interesting judgments. For content understood as "fantasy," viewers can judge its plausibility and/or its probability, focusing at any level from the depicted objects or clothing or creatures, to the protagonists' personalities or interactions, to the themes or messages, to the source of the ideas for the content. For content understood as "reality," viewers can judge its objectivity, accuracy, learnedness, spontaneity, and completeness, again focusing at any of several levels of content. There is, then, a need to consider both <u>what content is being judged</u> and <u>the criteria used in judging it</u> in assessing children's beliefs about television reality.

Most studies of television reality judgments have asked children to rate the realism of rather general aspects of content, such as the people on television, or television fathers, or what happens to bad people on television. When children are given more choice, however, they rarely discuss television at such a general level (Dorr, 1983; Dorr et al., 1980; Fernie, 1981; Kelly, 1981; Klapper, 1981). Dorr (1983) quantified this tendency in content analyses of kindergartners', second/third

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graders', and sixth graders' semi-structured interviews about television reality. For nearly all children, judgments about specific incidents accounted for somewhat more than one-quarter of all judgments made. Judgments about specific characters and specific situation comedies accounted for another quarter or more. The remaining judgments were about a mix of 19 other content categories, not one of which was very frequent for any age group.

Greenberg and Reeves (1976) provide some evidence that adjudged reality is greater the more specific the content being judged. This finding and the evidence that children tend to think about television content at the level of specific events or incidents involving specific protagonists in specific series suggest that research on reality judgments must take account of the level of specificity of the content being judged. Moreover, the actual reality of the content should also be considered. The superpowers of Wonder Woman should be judged less realistic, for example, than her staff work in the military, even though both judgments are about quite specific content.

Dorr's work, other studies of adjudged reality (e.g., Greenberg & Reeves, 1976; Kelly, 1981; Klapper, 1981), and studies of children's television viewing patterns (e.g., Lyle & Hoffman, 1972a, b) find that not all children are equally knowledgeable about the same television content. This suggests that different children think about different content when they judge general characteristics of television, for example the children on television, and that their judgments about researcher-selected specific content will be based on differing amounts of familiarity with the content. The obvious remedy of allowing children to choose content that is familiar to them brings to the experimenter the burden of subsequently organizing diverse content in some meaningful way, while insuring that each child and the experimenter know the content being judged.

Similar methodological trade-offs and choices arise in establishing the criterion or criteria children use in judging television reality. Three main types of criteria -- "magic window" reality, social reality defined by plausibility or possibility, and social reality defined by probability -- may be used at any age, although there are some age changes in their frequency of use. By the age of 8, when nearly all children are completely certain how any type of content is created, they rarely use "magic window" reality as a criterion (Dorr, 1983; Hawkins, 1977; Kelly, 1981). Extrapolating from several studies (Dorr, 1983; Fernie, 1981; Kelly, 1981), trends can be offerred for the two types of social reality criteria: (1) From early childhood through mid-adolescence there is an increase and then a decrease in the extent to which possibility or plausibility of television content, based on real world knowledge, is the

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criterion for judgment; and (2) from late childhood on into adulthood, there is a steady increase in the extent to which probability, rather than possibility, is the criterion. By this latter criterion, content is more realistic the more probable it is in everyday life.

In the present study we have sought to control some of the complexities that have been described and to study others. Participating children judged realism using one and only one criterion, the most developmentally advanced, probability in everyday life. They were also given specific content characteristics to judge, but items were chosen using earlier research and additional piloting that indicated each was something children thought about. Characteristics were organized into three superordinate categories, also used by children, that varied in concreteness and literalness, and a general realism item was added so that the effects of content specificity or generality could be tested. Children of three ages participated so that developmental differences could also be assessed. Finally, children chose two series they watched often as those whose characteristics they would judge. This procedure assured that children would be familiar with the content judged and that we would know what they were judging and could assess the effects of content itself on reality judgments.

Correlates of Reality Judgments

Research and writing about television effects and adjudged reality suggest several predictors of children's reality judgments. One of the most obvious is television literacy, meaning children's understanding of how the medium works, how and why its content comes to be, and how and why they use it as they do. Morison, McCarthy, and Gardner (1979) found that children who understood the workings of the medium better also were more sophisticated in the fantasy-reality judgments they made about its content. And several evaluations of television literacy curricula have demonstrated that exposure to such curricula -- presumably leading to greater television literacy -- is associated with changes in adjudged television reality (Dorr et al., 1980; Feshbach, Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982; Roberts, Christenson, Gibson, Mooser, & Goldberg, 1980), although at least one has not found the predicted relationship (Singer, Zuckerman, & Singer, 1980).

Another predictor explored in the literature is children's real-world knowledge about the content being judged. Greenberg (1972) demonstrated that children with less experience with blacks in everyday life found television portrayals of blacks more realistic. A similar relationship was not found in later work (Greenberg & Reeves, 1976), although knowledge about the content area conveyed by significant others (e.g., what a mother

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says about blacks in real life or on television) was related to reality judgments. Even in the absence of much other empirical evidence, most researchers assume that the more real-world knowledge children have, the more accurate their reality judgments will be, most often leading to lower adjudged reality.

A third predictor that has been directly tested at least once is children's viewing frequency, for which it was found that more frequently viewed content was judged more realistic (Greenberg & Reeves, 1976). Adjudged realism of the social reality type is also a presumed mediator in most studies of the social effects of television content. Gerbner, among others, has been most explicit in arguing that more frequent viewing of television leads to social reality beliefs (e.g., the likelihood of being mugged) that are more congruent with the world of television than the world of everyday life (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1980). The fact that increased viewing of television content is often associated with increased information, attitudes, and/or behaviors congruent with the television content (cf., Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978) may be taken as indirect support for the hypothesis that increased viewing is associated with greater adjudged reality.

Similar indirect arguments can be made for a fourth predictor, namely the uses and gratifications associated with programs. Much research has shown that viewers say they turn to television programs for many different gratifications, including relaxation, social interaction, social isolation, and learning (cf., Blumler & Katz, 1974; Rosengren, Wenner, & Palmgreen, 1985). Some research has shown that those who report seeking and finding more learning-oriented gratifications from programs actually learn more from them (Kline, Miller, & Morrison, 1974; Neuman, 1976). It can be argued that viewers would not use programs for learning if they did not judge their content to be more, rather than less, realistic, thereby making learning uses and gratifications predictors of adjudged reality.

The present study assessed the extent to which several variables predicted adjudged reality. Four were taken directly from previous work: television literacy, overall viewing of television series featuring families, viewing of the specific series judged, and learning-oriented uses and gratifications. One -- the child's judgment of the similarity between the television family and his or her own family -- is similar to constructs used in studies of the relationship between real-world knowledge and adjudged reality.

The last predictor -- the child's judgment of the similarity between the television family and his or her concept of an ideal family -- was not taken from any previous television research. It was suggested because of our impressions (which were later

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confirmed by content analyses) that television family members and the family unit are portrayed as having very good mental health and interpersonal dynamics. Family programs are not all sweetness and light and characters are not pollyannas, but they generally present a rather idealized image of imperfect human beings coping exceptionally well with themselves and each other. For several reasons one might expect children to have a similarly idealized image of real-life American families: (1) The interactions children are likely to see in families other than their own should be the better, more positive ones among all family interactions; (2) Children are likely to have limited experience overall with other families and so to assume, in the absence of countervailing evidence, that the ideal is the real; (3) Children may derive their image of real-life families from experience with television families who are portrayed in a rather idealized fashion; and (4) Like the adults studied by Tversky and Kahneman (1982), children may judge the prototypical family -- which should be rather idealized -- to be more frequent than it actually is. If children's images of real-life families do, for whatever reasons, tend toward the ideal, then the more the television family matches a child's concept of an ideal family, the more he or she should also judge it to be realistic.

METHODS

Subjects

Participating children were drawn from one public school and one private school in the greater Los Angeles area. There were 27 7-year-olds, 19 11-year-olds, and 19 15-year-olds, with somewhat more girls than boys at each age. Most children at each age were white native speakers of English, while a few were black, hispanic, or asian children who were either competent or native speakers of English. All children had parental permission to participate, and all had also given permission themselves. Children, their parents, and their teachers were participating in a larger study for which the children and instruments reported here are a subsample.

Instruments

Six instruments contributed data used for the present paper. All were paper and pencil instruments involving rating, frequency, multiple choice, true-false, and/or percentage responses. Many were based on earlier work, although each was revised to meet the interests and needs of the present study. All were extensively pretested to be certain that all items and response options were understandable to and meaningful for 7-, 11-, and 15-year-olds.

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The Realism instrument asked children to select the two most frequently viewed television series from a comprehensive list of currently broadcast series featuring families and to complete a 13-item questionnaire for each series. For each item children indicated the percentage of real-life American families like the television family, circling one of six boxes representing 0% to 100% in 20% increments. The percentage was written underneath each box and that percentage of the box itself was blackened. One item asked about overall realism, five asked about demographics (such as wealth, family size, and family structure), three asked about actions (such as things family members do and family rules), and four asked about feelings (such as kinds experienced and means of expression). The items and dimensions had both been demonstrated in other work (Doubleday, 1985) to be used spontaneously by children in categorizing series featuring families.

Three other instruments also required judgments about the same two favorite series. Two copies of each instrument were completed, one for each series. The Uses and Gratifications instrument, based on earlier work by Kovaric, Dorr, and Nicol (1983) asked children to rate on a four-point scale how much they obtained each of 10 gratifications from watching each series and how much they liked the series. The three gratifications representing learning from programs (e.g., learn how to act) were used in the present analyses. The Match Actual instrument asked children to indicate how similar their own family was to the family in each of their two favorite series. For each series, one item asked about overall similarity using a five-point scale and 13 asked about similarity on specific dimensions using three-point scales. Twelve items were the same as those for the Realism instrument, and the thirteenth was whether the television family was portrayed as living now, like the child's own family, or in the past. The Match Aspired instrument was like the Match Actual instrument except that children were comparing television families to their concept of a perfect family and items for two specific dimensions were omitted (when the family lived and the number of blacks and whites in the family). The two match instruments were based on work by the third author (Doubleday, 1985).

The Television Literacy instrument asked children to answer five multiple choice questions about television production, five multiple choice questions about broadcasting economics, and five three choice (tv, real life, both tv and real life) questions about stereotypicality and predictability. Most items were adapted from previous work by the first author (Dorr et al., 1980).

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The Viewing Frequency instrument, adapted from earlier work by the first two authors (Kovaric et al., 1983), asked children to indicate how often during the present school year they had viewed each of 25 series. Four were dummy items, and the rest were entertainment series featuring families with children and/or adolescents, where the series was originally produced for primetime viewing on network stations and was now broadcast either once a week during primetime on a network station or five days a week at other times on a network affiliate or independent station. The six possible frequencies for current network programs ranged from never seen to nearly every week; for syndicated programs a seventh frequency, a couple times a week, was added.

Procedures

Children were tested in two sessions of approximately one hour each in an unused room or at outside lunchtables in their school. The instruments from which data were taken for this paper were administered along with others in a predetermined order that assured variety in the kinds of responses required, placed the most demanding instruments first each session, and did not place instruments with the same or similar item structure back-to-back. At each age half the children by random assignment received instruments from Packet A (one at a time) at the first session and the other half received instruments from Packet B. The order of pertinent instruments in Packet A was Match Actual then Uses and Gratifications. The order in Packet B was Television Literacy, Match Aspired, Viewing Frequency, and Realism.

The two older groups of children were tested in medium to large size same-age groups. Groups were randomly assigned to one of three experimenters who gave instructions, orchestrated activities, answered questions, and checked to be certain children were completing the instruments correctly. The 7-year-olds were tested individually. For 7-year-olds, all instructions, items, and response options were read out loud by the experimenter, while children indicated response choices themselves. Older children read and answered the items for themselves after the experimenter read the directions. There were 3 female and 3 male experimenters; one was Filipino, and the rest were white. All were well trained on the instruments and in testing children. Children were randomly assigned to experimenters without regard for sex or ethnicity.

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RESULTS

Series Chosen By Children

Since children were free to choose the two series they judged from more than 20 situation comedies and dramas featuring families, the first task was to learn what series were chosen and to organize them into groups for analysis. Over all three ages 17 different series were chosen, 14 by 7-year-olds, 11 by 11-year-olds, and 13 by 15-year-olds. By far the most frequently chosen series at each age was The Cosby Show, having 31 first and second choices total. The next most frequently chosen series were Diff'rent Strokes, Happy Days, Family Ties, and Double Trouble, each chosen 14, 12, 11, and 10 times respectively. The remaining 12 series were each chosen 7 or fewer times as either the first or second series to be rated.

Examination of the distributions of series chosen for rating by the children and knowledge of the series derived from earlier content analyses suggested two principle means for organizing them into groups: family structure and family socioeconomic status. Other possible means were rejected because of known lack of variability among series or poor distribution in the current data. These included race or ethnicity of main characters, genre, era of production, era of setting, themes, and family mental health.

To categorize each child's two series, the entire sample of 17 series was rank ordered once for family structure and once for socioeconomic status (rho = .25). Families with more traditional structure had (1) two parents rather than one, and/or (2) natural parents rather than step, adoptive, or foster parents, and/or (3) a mother working only as a homemaker rather than a mother employed outside the home. Higher SES families (1) lived in bigger or more expensive dwellings, and/or (2) lived in more exclusive neighborhoods, and/or (3) had more expensive clothing and personal possessions, and/or (4) had parents with higher status occupations, and/or (5) engaged in more upscale activities. For each categorization, of the two series chosen by a child the one ranking higher was assigned to the more traditional family structure (or higher SES) group. Because subsequent analyses revealed virtually no main effects or interactions for series categorized by family socioeconomic status, it will be omitted from all further discussion.

Table 1 shows the distribution of series by age and family structure as they will be used in all subsequent analyses. Every age by family structure cell contains several different series, with 5-11 series per cell. Children in the three age groups chose slightly different combinations of series to rate, but there is considerable commonality in series across age. Some

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series are sometimes classified as more traditional and other times as less traditional, but the average rank of the more and less traditional groups differs substantially at each age. As shown in Table 2, the series in the more and less traditional groups were very frequently viewed by children of all three ages, and there are no apparent differences by age or family structure in the frequency of viewing.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Beliefs About Realism

Intercorrelations among the 13 items of the realism instrument ranged from -.13 to .61, with most hovering around .20. Given the low inter-item correlations, subsequent analyses were conducted for each item separately and for items grouped into the conceptual categories of general realism and realism of feelings, actions, and demographics.

Combining the three ages together, item means indicate that television families in the more traditional category were seen as being like more than half of all real-life families on 6 items (kinds of feelings, reasons for feelings, amount of money, family rules, number of people, and number of real parents), while television families in the less traditional category were judged to be like the majority of real-life families on only 2 items (family rules and kinds of feelings). Conversely, television families in the less traditional category were judged to be like less than half of all real-life families on 10 items, while this occurred on only 5 items for television families in the more traditional category. Interestingly, responses on the general realism item were among the lowest of any given. For the more traditional structure group, 46% of real-life families were judged to be like the series family, the lowest percentage of all 13 estimates for the realism of the television families in this group. For the less traditional structure group, the figure was 42%, the second lowest percentage for that group.

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of real-life American families 7-, 11-, and 15-year-olds believed to be like the families in the series categorized as more and less traditional. The 13 items for which these judgments were made are ordered by general realism, feelings, actions, and demographics. The figure shows that the estimated percentages for each age and family structure group ranged from 35% to 70% of all real-life American families, with judgments for most items between 40% and 60%. It also shows that there was little variability by age or family structure group in the estimated percentages for items asking about things family members do, how family members act, and what

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the family home is like and considerability variability for items asking about the kinds of feelings family members have, the reasons for family members feelings, the number of people in the family, the number of real parents in the family, the number of blacks and/or whites in the family, and the general realism of the series.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The realism data were analyzed in an age (3) by family structure (2) MANOVA, with repeated measures on the second factor. Sex was omitted from the analysis, since preliminary age X sex X family structure ANOVAs for the 13 realism items separately had revealed no main effects for sex and only one significant interaction (the three-way interaction for the family rules item). Four dependent measures were entered into the MANOVA: general realism (1 item), feelings subscore (sum of 4 items), actions subscore (sum of 3 items), and demographics subscore (sum of 5 items). Figure 2 presents the findings for the four dependent measures graphically.

Insert Figure 2 about here

For the overall model there was a significant effect for family structure (Wilks' Lambda = 0.73, F equivalent(4,59)=5.38, p=.0009). On each of the four dependent measures, television series in the more traditional group were rated more realistic than those in the less traditional group. In the univariate analyses, however, the family structure variable was significant only for the demographics subscore (F(1,62)=22.26, p=.0001), suggesting that differences in the perceived realism of demographic items were the major contributor to the significant effect for family structure in the multivariate analysis.

The interaction of age and family structure was just significant in the multivariate analysis (Wilks' Lambda = 0.77, F equivalent(8,118)=2.01, p=.05). In the univariate analyses, the interaction did not approach significance for either the actions or demographics subscore, was nearly significant for the general realism item (F(2,62)=2.99, p=.06), and was significant for the feelings subscore (F(2,62)=4.34, p=.02). The best summary of the multivariate age by family structure interaction is as follows: Children of all three ages perceive television families with more traditional structure to be fairly realistic, with a small decrease in perceived realism between 11- and 15-year-olds; 7-year-olds perceive television families with less traditional structure to be equally realistic; 11-year-olds perceive them to

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be markedly less realistic; and 15-year-olds perceive them to be either somewhat more realistic (feelings subscore) or somewhat less realistic (general realism).

Correlates of Realism Beliefs

To assess the correlates of children's realism beliefs, regression analyses were run. For each analysis, age (coded as a 3-value dummy variable) was entered first to control for any age effects and then one of the six predictors was entered. Four dependent variables were used: general realism, feelings subscore, actions subscore, and demographics subscore. The 24 analyses were run once using data pertinent to television families in the more traditional group and once again using data pertinent to those in the less traditional group. As shown in Table 3, the intercorrelations about the four dependent variables were moderately strong (.35-.60 for the more traditional group and .26-.63 for the less traditional group) and generally higher for the more rather than less traditional group. The intercorrelations among predictors were generally low to moderate. The major exceptions, for both the more and less traditional groups, are the correlations between Match Actual and Match Aspired and between Overall Viewing Frequency and Series Viewing Frequency. In general, however, the regression analyses were not using highly correlated predictors.

Insert Table 3 about here

In accounting for children's realism judgments, the six predictors were more effective for the less traditional rather than the more traditional group. Six of the 24 regression equations were significant for the less traditional group, while only one was significant for the more traditional group. In addition, for the less traditional group 8 predictor variables were significant in their regression equations, while only 3 were significant for the more traditional group. This pattern of findings is presented in Table 4 where each significant predictor for any of the four realism scores is indicated for both the more and less traditional group. In no case is a predictor significant for both groups for the same realism measure, nor is a significant predictor for one group and dependent measure generally approaching significance for the other group and the same dependent measure.

Insert Table 4 about here

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Table 5 presents results for the 11 regression analyses in which the predictor variable was significant for either the more or the less traditional group. For the more traditional group, as hypothesized, television literacy predicted adjudged realism, at least for realism of family members' actions, with more literate children finding them less realistic. Also as hypothesized, more viewing was associated with increased adjudged realism, at least for the general realism and demographics measures. It should be noted, however, that the overall regression equations for two of these three predictors were not themselves significant.

Insert Table 5 about here

Different predictors were significant for series in the less traditional group. As hypothesized, associating more learning uses and gratifications with a series predicted more adjudged realism, at least for the feelings subscore. Again as hypothesized, a greater adjudged match between the television family and the child's own family predicted greater adjudged realism, at least for the feelings and actions subscores. A greater adjudged match between the television family and the child's concept of his or her ideal family, as hypothesized, also predicted greater adjudged realism, but on all four dependent measures. Finally, also as hypothesized, children who more often viewed a series also found it more realistic, at least on the feelings subscore.

DISCUSSION

This study examined children's judgments about the reality of popular television series featuring families with children and teenagers in them. It asked children to define reality in reference to frequency among real-life American families, so that characteristics of television families were judged more realistic when they were believed to be more common among real-life families. Variations in adjudged reality due to children's age, the verisimilitude of the television content, and the specificity of the content were assessed. In addition, the ability of six variables to predict children's reality judgments was tested.

Television content itself influenced children's reality estimates. Series featuring families with more and less traditional structure were judged quite differently on items asking about such elements of family demographics as number of people in the household, number of parents, and race, and they were judged more similarly on items asking about the expression and management of emotion, the activities in which the family engages, and the overall realism of the series. It is our impression that children correctly recognized demographic

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differences among families in the two types of series and, just as correctly, recognized their lack of differences in portrayed feelings, actions, and general realism.

The level of specificity of the television content also seemed to influence reality judgments. Compared to other research, the 13 items in the Realism instrument were fairly specific. The most general asked about the overall realism of a particular series! Nonetheless, for analysis purposes items could be aggregated into three subscores (demographics, actions, and feelings) and a general realism item that represent increasing levels of generality and content integration. Just as Greenberg and Reeves (1976) found, the most general judgment (general realism) received the lowest perceived realism score. The subscores did not, however, order themselves as the specificity hypothesis would predict (reality of feelings less than reality of actions less than reality of demographics). Moreover, the judgments for demographics show that the verisimilitude of the content has more influence on perceived reality than does its specificity.

Age alone was never a determinant of adjudged reality. There is little hint anywhere in the data of simple and significant age effects, although there are indications that children of different ages judge different types of content differently. The figures for series in the more traditional group suggest a small, linear decline in adjudged realism with increasing age. This is exactly the pattern -- especially if it had a steeper decline -- that developmentalists would expect. Television series featuring families with less traditional structures confuse the picture. All children recognized that the less traditional families' demographics were, indeed, less frequent in everyday life. But the actions, feelings, and general realism of these families apparently presented judgment problems. On these items, 7-year-olds found families with less traditional structures ever so slightly more realistic than families with more traditional structures. But, for the same items, there is a precipitous decrease among 11-year-olds and then a minimal to marked increase among 15-year-olds in adjudged reality for families with less traditional structures.

Without interview data, we do not know the reasoning behind these judgments. If one believes as we do that the social reality of the feelings and actions items was about the same for series in the more and less traditional groups, then a plausible but not compelling explanation for the age curves can be derived from common developmental differences in children's reasoning and cognition. One is an increase with age in the number of elements, dimensions, or criteria children can think about at once. Another is an increase in children's ability to weigh, discount, and concatenate these elements properly. Taking both

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changes into consideration one could argue that 7-year-olds saw the two groups of series as fairly similar because they thought only about each item as they rated it, 11-year-olds saw series in the less traditional group as much less realistic because they could not disregard their less realistic family structures no matter what item they were rating, and 15-year-olds again saw the two groups as more similar because they could disregard elements of family structure when these were irrelevant to an item.

Given the absence of strong, consistent age effects, the measures and methods must be re-examined. The reality criterion, probability in the American population, is one that previous research strongly suggests older children and adolescents use more spontaneously, frequently, and well. The 7-15 age range is large enough to capture any real developmental change using this criterion. On these grounds, developmental differences should have shown up if they exist.

It may be argued that developmental differences did not appear because younger children did not understand the Realism instrument. Despite evidence for developmental differences in children's spontaneous use of a real-world probability criterion, we remain confident that all children tested could use the criterion as it was operationalized in the Realism instrument. The consistent and appropriate family structure differences in the demographics subscores for children of all three ages support this belief. Moreover, in other recent work using multidimensional scaling techniques and interviews, children of the same ages thought about and grouped on the basis of dimensions and characteristics like those represented by the Realism instrument items (Doubleday, 1985). Finally, extensive piloting, especially with younger children, indicated that children understood the items and the nature of the task.

Perhaps it is time, then, to stop expecting many general developmental increases or decreases in children's reality judgments about television content, generally or even specifically, at least once children have learned how and why content is created and broadcast. This is not to suggest that children do not become more sophisticated, and probably even more accurate, in their judgments of television's social reality nor more able to think well about its non-trivial representations and messages. Rather it is to suggest that television content is more complex and multifaceted than we researchers have sometimes wanted to credit it with being and that children can think better and with more differentiation than we permit in some research.

The Realism instrument is a step toward incorporating these more complicated views of children and television into our research instruments. It asks children to judge specific rather than general content characteristics of television series with

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which they are very familiar. The characteristics themselves reflect much of what children focus on when thinking about television, and they sample from several different domains of content characteristics. The required reality judgment is quite clear, and there can be no question about the reality criterion the child is using -- if he or she is attending to the task at all. Finally, because the reality criterion, the content characteristics, and the television content are all specified, researchers can be fairly confident about what children are actually considering when they make reality judgments. Interviews are superb for acquiring detailed, explicit information about the judgments and reasoning of children, but the Realism instrument can provide some similar information with less cost and more consistency across children in its administration and in the types of data provided.

The accuracy of the children's realism judgments using this instrument has not yet been touched on. In general, we do not have the data needed to judge accuracy, and in several cases we cannot imagine what data could be used as the standard. In any case, accuracy judgments would have to be made separately for each item for each series, a nearly overwhelming task. As an alternative, one might use adults' estimates as the standard, but we have little confidence in their accuracy. Moreover, judgment accuracy per se should not be very important in the social effects process. The important factor is children's beliefs about how accurately television content represents real life. That is what we have measured.

Based on previous research and a little fancy argumentation, six variables were selected as likely predictors of perceived social reality. Analyses conducted separately for series in the more and less traditional groups, using four different dependent variables, provided some support for all hypothesized relationships. Those children who knew more about television production and broadcasting found television content less realistic. Those who felt the television family was more similar to their own family found the television family more realistic, as did those who watched the series more often and those who watched similar series more often. Those who turned to a series wanting and expecting to learn more from it also found it more realistic. Finally, those who felt the television family was more similar to their concept of an ideal family also found the television family more realistic.

Despite some confirmation of every hypothesis, the pattern of findings was not very strong nor was it conceptually coherent. Three variables were significant in only one of eight regression analyses run for each variable (learning uses and gratifications, television literacy, and viewing of the series being judged). Two were significant in two of eight analyses (perceived

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similarity between own and television families and viewing of series featuring families). The strongest variable -- perceived similarity between ideal and television families -- was a significant predictor for all four perceived realism measures, but only for series featuring families with less traditional structures. Further perplexing variations in the pattern of findings include variations in the number of times different subscores were predicted significantly (4 for feelings, 3 for actions, 2 for demographics, and 2 for general realism) and variations in the number of times realism scores were predicted for series in the more and less traditional groups (3 and 8 times respectively).

The performance of the Match Aspired variable deserves some further comment. Of the six predictors, the least was expected of it and its functioning is the most difficult to pin down. Why should greater perceived similarity between one's concept of an ideal family and a television family with a less traditional structure be associated with greater perceived realism of that television family? Perhaps children were dissatisfied with their families. Based on scores for two satisfaction measures administered to this sample, we have to conclude that children's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their families was within normal limits.

Perhaps it is a chicken and egg problem, because children's images of real-life American families are actually based on families they have seen on television. If so, their images of real-life families would be rather idealized. Greater similarity between a television family and an ideal family would then lead to greater perceived realism. Fernie (1981) provided pertinent anecdotal support for this explanation. Several children explained a marked disparity in their ability to describe real-life people with whom they often interacted (e.g., teachers) and television characters by noting that they did not see nearly as much of the real people's lives as they did of the television characters' lives. This possible television effect is worth a little more exploration.

The discussion has turned back now to where it began -- the social effects of television. The present research is part of a larger project testing models of the television effects process using series featuring families with children. Given the data, how much effect might be expected and what mediating role might be played by perceived social reality? Children have been shown to judge many characteristics of these series to be fairly realistic. If more realistic content does indeed exert more social influence, there ought to be some effects of viewing these series. For 7- to 15-year-olds, the data give no reason to believe that viewing effects will differ by age simply because the different age groups judge the reality of the series

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differently. But within each age and for all ages combined there is enough variation in the realism scores to support further consideration of the mediating function of perceived realism in the television effects process.

FOOTNOTE

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Table 1
Television Series Chosen by 7-, 11-, and 15-Year-Olds
Categorized by Family Structure

7-Year-Olds		11-Year-Olds		15-Year-Olds	
# Ss	Series (Rank)*	# Ss	Series (Rank)	# Ss	Series (Rank)
More Traditional Family Structure					
6	Cosby Show (3)	10	Cosby Show (3)	7	Cosby Show (3)
5	Silver Spoons (8)	5	Family Ties (2)	4	Family Ties (2)
3	Beaver (1)	2	Happy Days (6)	2	Beaver (1)
3	Happy Days (6)	1	Brady Bunch (7)	2	Who's Boss (12)
2	Family Ties (2)	1	Gimme Break (10)	1	Charles (5)
2	Webster (9)			1	Happy Days (6)
2	Gimme Break (10)			1	Brady Bunch (7)
2	Diff Strokes (11)			1	Gimme Break (10)
1	Little House (4)				
1	Brady Bunch (7)				
5.8	Average Rank	3.6	Average Rank	4.4	Average Rank
Less Traditional Family Structure					
7	Diff Strokes (11)	5	Double Trouble (16)	3	Diff Strokes (11)
6	Punky Brewster (15)	4	Cosby Show (3)	3	Happy Days (6)
3	Double Trouble (16)	2	It's Your Move (13)	2	Facts Life (17)
2	Happy Days (6)	2	Diff Strokes (11)	2	Double Trouble (16)
2	Charles (5)	1	Punky Brewster (15)	2	Charles (5)
2	Cosby Show (3)	1	Gidget (14)	2	Cosby Show (3)
1	Gidget (14)	1	Gimme Break (10)	1	It's Your Move (13)
1	Webster (9)	1	Silver Spoons (8)	1	Who's Boss (12)
1	Silver Spoons (8)	1	Brady Bunch (7)	1	Gimme Break (10)
1	Brady Bunch (7)	1	Happy Days (6)	1	Brady Bunch (7)
1	Little House (4)			1	Little House (4)
10.6	Average Rank	10.5	Average Rank	9.4	Average Rank

* In ranking 1 = series with most traditional family structure

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Table 2
Viewing Frequency of Series Rated By Children

Structure of Television Family

Age Child		More Traditional	Less Traditional
7	$\bar{x}$	5.5*	5.1
	sd	1.2	1.3
	N	27	27
11	$\bar{x}$	5.8	6.2
	sd	1.0	0.4
	N	19	19
15	$\bar{x}$	5.0	4.9
	sd	1.5	1.5
	N	19	19

* 5 = about a couple times a month
  6 = about once a week
  7 = several times a week

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Table 3
Intercorrelations of Dependent Measures
And of Their Predictors

Dependent Measures

	Gen'l Realism	Feelings	Actions	Demographics
Gen'l Realism		.26	.28	.35
Feelings	.35		.63	.34
Actions	.37	.56		.37
Demographics	.49	.60	.49	

Predictors

	Uses & Grats	TV Lit	Match Actual	Match Aspired	Overall Viewing	Series Viewing
Uses & Grats		-.17	.29	.19	.14	.28
TV Lit	-.32		.10	.19	.22	-.04
Match Actual	.21	.07		.58	.07	-.03
Match Aspired	.16	.14	.61		.01	.01
Overall Viewing	.14	.22	.17	-.13		.60
Series Viewing	.34	-.05	.06	.03	.43	

NB: Correlations below the diagonal are for series in the more traditional group. Those above the diagonal are for series in the less traditional group.

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Table 4
Significant Predictors for Four Realism Scores for
Series Classified by Family Structure

	Uses & Grats	TV Lit	Match Actual	Match Aspired	Overall Viewing	Series Viewing
Gen'l Realism	--, --	--, --	--, --	--, LT	MT, --	--,--
Feelings	--, LT	--, --	--, LT	--, LT	--, --	--, LT
Actions	--, --	MT, --	--, LT	--, LT	--, --	--, --
Demographics	--, --	--, --	--, --	--, LT	MT, --	--, --

-- = Predictor not significant
MT = Predictor significant for More Traditional group
LT = Predictor significant for Less Traditional group

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Table 5
Significant Regression Equations

Dependent Variable	Predictor Variable	Beta	Significance	Significance of Equation
More Traditional Group				
Actions	TV Literacy	-.38	F(1,61)=6.15 p=.02	F(3,61)=2.08 p=.11
Gen'l Realism	Overall Viewing	.49	F(1,61)=7.77 p=.00	F(3,61)=3.05 p=.03
Demographics	Overall Viewing	1.33	F(1,61)=6.27 p=.02	F(3,61)=2.30 p=.08
Less Traditional Group				
Feelings	Uses & Grats	.59	F(1,56)=8.38 p=.00	F(3,56)=5.53 p=.00
Feelings	Match Actual	.43	F(1,56)=15.14 p=.00	F(3,56)=8.08 p=.00
Actions	Match Actual	.21	F(1,56)=4.00 p=.05	F(3,56)=1.87 p=.14
Gen'l Realism	Match Aspired	.07	F(1,61)=5.81 p=.02	F(3,61)=6.56 p=.00
Feelings	Match Aspired	.26	F(1,61)=5.42 p=.02	F(3,61)=3.96 p=.01
Actions	Match Aspired	.23	F(1,61)=6.22 p=.02	F(3,61)=2.63 p=.06
Demographics	Match Aspired	.25	F(1,61)=4.06 p=.05	F(3,61)=1.44 p=.24
Feelings	Series Viewing	.78	F(1,59)=4.76 p=.03	F(3,59)=3.19 p=.03

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Figure 1
Children's Judgments of the Realism of Television Series Featuring Families
By Age of Child and Structure of Television Family
For Each Item of the Realism Instrument

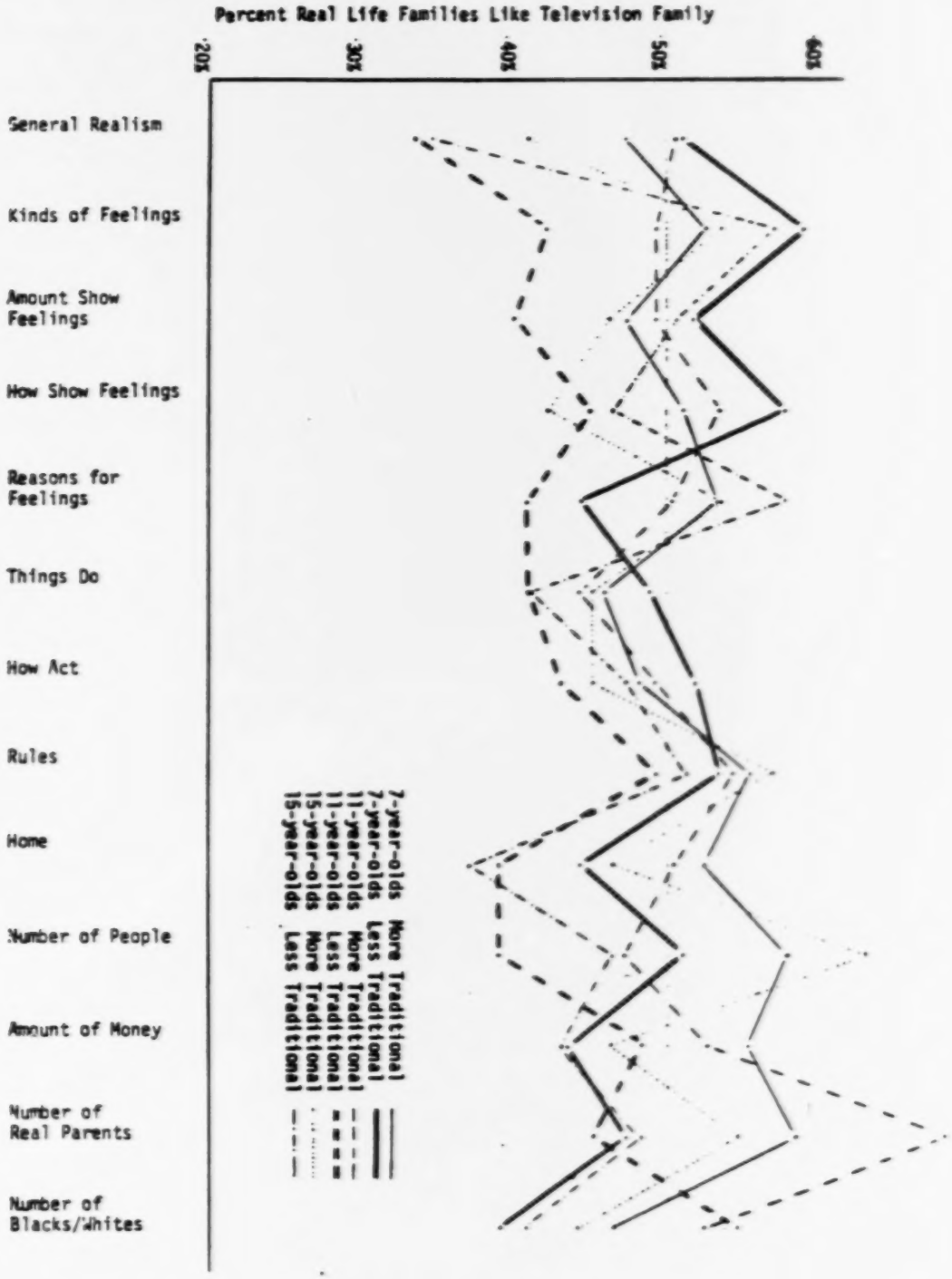

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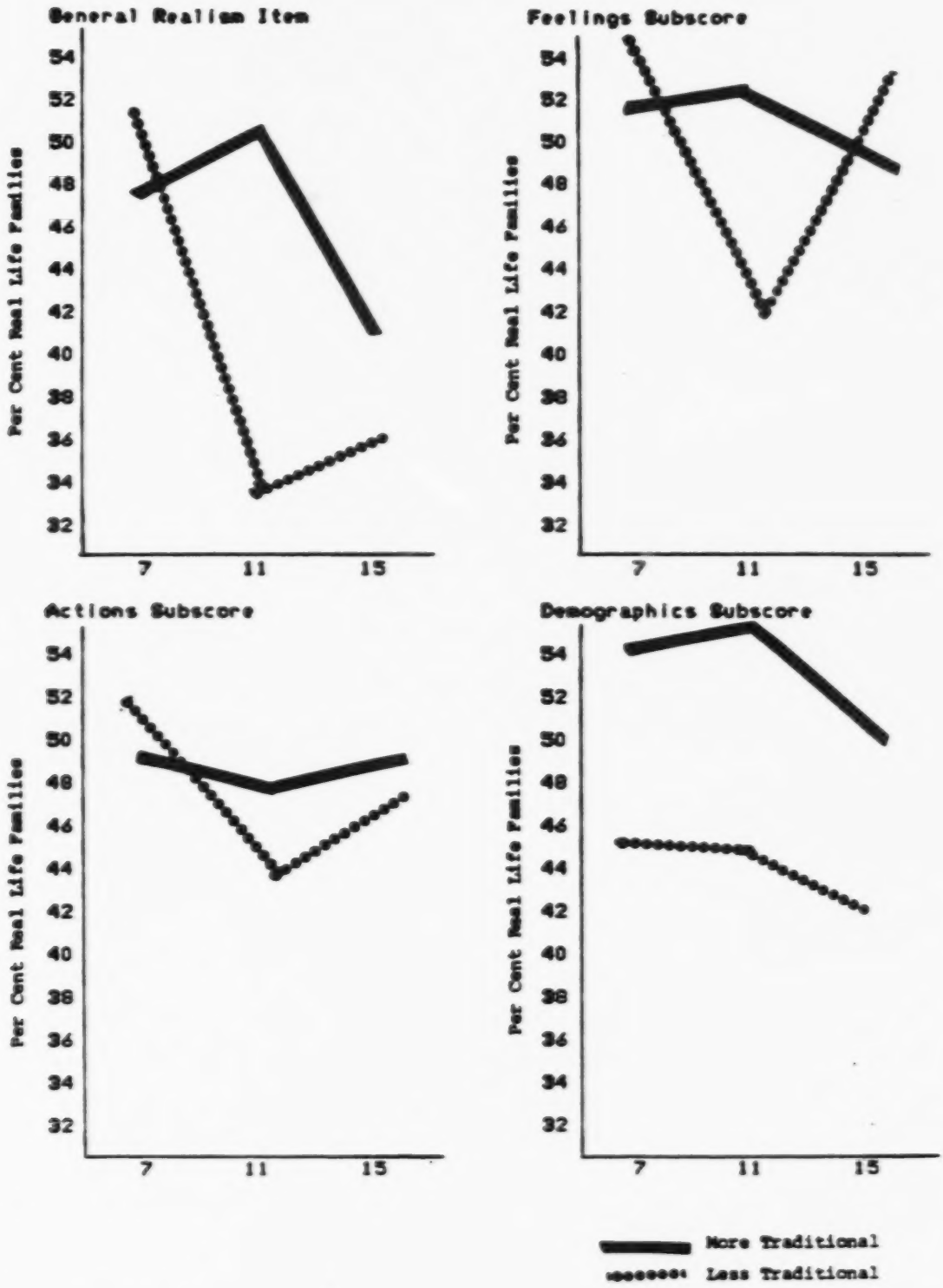
Figure 2
Children's Judgments of the Realism of Television Series Featuring Families
By Age of Child and Structure of Television Family
For General Realism Item and Feelings, Actions, and Demographics Subscores



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